DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 112 443 CS 501 118

AUTHOR Gouran, Dennis S.
TITLE The Watergate Cover-Up: Its Dynamics and Its Implications.
PUB DATE Dec 75
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (61st, Houston, Texas , December 26-30, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.95 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Decision Making; Ethics; *Group Behavior; *Group Dynamics; Higher Education; *Political Issues; Public Officials
IDENTIFIERS *Watergate

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the group dynamics relating to the events surrounding the Watergate coverup and attempts to identify the factors that predispose of the parties involved to make inappropriate, foolish, and ineffective choices concerning a criminal case in which none of them initially was culpable. The initial Watergate breakin is briefly outlined, and the details of the Watergate coverup are described extensively through the use of manuscripts from the Watergate hearings and books written by such eminent political commentators as Theodore H. White, Arthur Schlesinger, and Dan Rather. Four points of view are then offered to account for the behavior patterns and decision-making procedures of the individuals involved in the Watergate coverup. Each of these views is dismissed as only a partial explanation for the coverup because President Nixon could still have made the right decision to avoid culpability. In conclusion, the author argues that to understand why Nixon did not, one has to focus on the communication behavior of the group involved as that behavior reflects the forces that inhibited their ability to make not only what would have been "the easy" decision but the right one as well. (RB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED112443

THE WATERGATE COVER-UP: ITS DYNAMICS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Dennis S. Gouran
Indiana University

SCA Convention
December 26-30, 1975

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Dennis S. Gouran
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

CS501118

THE WATERGATE COVER-UP: ITS DYNAMICS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Dennis S. Gouran

Introduction

In his farewell address to assembled members of the Whitehouse staff, Richard Nixon warned of the destructive potential of hatred: "Always remember that others may hate you. But those who hate you don't win unless you hate them--and then you destroy yourself."[1] How ironic that such an injunction should issue from a man who less than two years earlier had conspired with top ranking members of his administration to use the federal machinery to "screw" their "political enemies."[2] Perhaps the observation represented the long awaited act of contrition for which those convinced of the President's guilt but who were, nontheless, eager to see him not suffer had hoped, or perhaps it was merely the kind of statement his mind had reasoned appropriate for such an occasion--that final bit of sagacity a leader is expected to impart as he vacates the citadel of power and crosses the threshold of history. Whatever the case, Richard Nixon's political demise was not the result of his hatreds but the culmination of a series of decisions on which he and his most trusted advisors collaborated and which, judged by any criterion of effectiveness, were hopelessly inadequate.

This is an essay about group dynamics, and, although the group in question was extraordinary, the principles that governed its behavior were not. To profess understanding of the Watergate Cover-up is to imply that one can identify the factors that predisposed the parties involved to make inappropriate, foolish, or otherwise ineffective choices concerning the disposition of a criminal case in which none of them initially had culpability. The process by which such decisions were reached, although somewhat clouded by incomplete information, is amenable to description. In fact, the availability of transcripts of critical conversations related to the events surrounding Watergate has made the analysis of decision-making less complicated than for possibly any other set of decisions in Presidential history.

Background

On June 17, 1972, the apprehension of five men[3] engaged in clandestine operations at the National Democratic Committee Headquarters set in motion a sequence of activities that eventually would lead to the resignation of Richard Nixon from the Office of President of the United States. The conspirators, working under the direction of E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, were ostensibly engaged in intelligence gathering on Democratic campaign strategies. Were it not for the intrusion of Administration and CRP officials, the incident could have come to a natural conclusion, with those involved being prosecuted for their fellonious entry into the DNC office.

Rather than permitting the system of justice to run its course and suffer the potentially embarrassing consequences from the inevitable revelation of the conspirators' association with the Committee to Re-elect

the President, key members of that committee and the President himself moved swiftly to obscure the relationship. Specifically, John Mitchell, campaign director, issued a press release denying any connection between those arrested in the break-in and the Committee to Re-elect the President.[4] Press Secretary, Ron Ziegler, characterizing the episode as a "third rate buglary attempt," refused official comment.[5] Jeb Magruder, Deputy Director of the Committee, in a series of meetings conspired with Messrs. Mitchell, LaRue, Dean, and Mardian to place sole responsibility for the Watergate break-in on Gordon Liddy.[6] Finally, the President directed his Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman, to have Central Intelligence Agency interfere with Federal Bureau of Investigation's inquiry into the Watergate burglary.[7]

What prompted these ill conceived responses to the events of June 17 may never be fully understood; however, as Magruder has observed, "No one ever considered that there would not be a cover-up. It seemed inconceivable that with our political power we could not erase the mistake we had made."[8] Perhaps therein lies a partial explanation for the bizarre occurrences that would see a President re-elected by the largest landslide in history resign in disgrace a short twenty-one months later. The people with whom Richard Nixon surrounded himself and he likewise were apparently incapable of judging their actions in any but the most pragmatic of terms. Hence, the commission of a fellonious act became a political mistake, and the standard by which to judge its seriousness was the extent to which the consequences could be controlled. The ironic aspect of such a conception of criminal behavior is that, in precluding the examination of

the moral dimensions of the problems they faced and the solutions they devised, the President and his associates initiated decisions that increased the severity of the political response and the consequences to which it led.

As one attempts to unravel the dynamics instrumental in shaping the Watergate debacle, he soon discovers that there may have been as many as four separate phases to the cover-up. At least, it is possible to discriminate among that many. Initially, the cover-up began in the Committee to Re-elect the President. In as much as Liddy had organized the buglary attempt in his capacity as Special Counsel, if there were to be a cover-up, almost necessarily it would have to start in this agency.[9] With near simultaneity, however, the President and Haldeman were collaborating on other means of coping with the problem. Because of the mechanically erased portion of the June 20 conversation, it is not possible to pinpoint precisely the moment at which Nixon and Haldeman became involved. On the other hand, the June 23 transcript eliminates any doubt that they were implicated.[10] Between June 18 and September 15, the actions of those participating in the separate phases of the cover-up were consolidated under the leadership of John Dean, and there existed an apparently firm conviction among members of the inner circle that Dean had successfully discharged his responsibility.[11]

From September 15, 1972 to April 30, 1973, chiefly four people, including the President, Dean, Haldeman, and John Ehrlichman, engaged in decision-making discussions concerning the Watergate case. In a certain sense, this period can be described as a cover-up of the cover-up. The

preoccupation of these particular individuals was to cope with the disclosures that could be made in imminent investigations of campaign practices and in the trials of Watergate defendants. By April 30, a decision had been made to ask for the resignations of Dean, Ehrlichman, and Haldeman.[12] Pursuant to these developments, the cover-up entered its fourth and final stage as a pattern of public denials of Presidential involvement, confrontations with judicial and legislative demands, doctoring of evidence, and erosion of public confidence in the President's innocence emerged and quickened the pace with which Richard Nixon's political career would come to an inglorious conclusion.

Only in the third phase of the cover-up is the evidence sufficient to permit a careful examination of the decision-making behavior of the President and his associates as they responded to the developing Watergate crisis. As a result, the contents of this essay focus primarily on the period of time encompassed by that phase. One should recognize, however, that many of the factors identified, no doubt, have applicability in matters not covered in the analysis although the degree of applicability is difficult to assess in the absence of data comparable to those available for the months between September 15 and April 30.

Dynamics of the Cover-up

I have previously intimated that a major deficiency in the President and his associates' disposition of the Watergate affair was the dearth of any consideration of the moral dimensions of the problems they faced or the solutions they generated. One searches the hundreds of pages of transcripts in the hope of discovering as much as a single expression of

moral concern but finds none. Even the much publicized "It would be wrong" response allegedly made to John Dean, and subsequently attested to by Haldeman, concerning blackmail payments to Howard Hunt was actually made in a different context about a different issue.[13] The facts belied the protestation of innocence. It is clear from a reading of the March 21 conversation that the President expressed no moral reservations whatsoever about the payment of hush money. In fact, the House Judiciary Committee's version of the transcripts shows the President's response to have been, "Well for Christ's sake get it . . . ."[14] The statement purported to have piqued Nixon's indignation actually referred to John Dean's concerns about the political implications of granting clemency to defendants in the case prior to the '74 elections.[15]

Even more convincing than the absence of expressed concern about moral considerations are the characterizations of the President and his associates frequently made of the Watergate case. For example:

> This is a war. We take a few shots and it will be over. We will give them a few shots and it will be over. Don't worry. I wouldn't want to be on the other side right now. Would you?[16] (The President to Dean on containment)

> So you just try to button it up as well as you can and hope for the best, and remember basically the damn business is unfortunately trying to cut our losses.[17] (The President to Dean on containment)

> So we can play the same game they are playing. We ought to be able to do better at it.[18] (Haldeman to the President and Dean on the DNC suit)

> I am convinced that we are going to make it the whole road and put this thing in the funny pages of the history books.[19] (Dean to the President on the cover-up)

> I do think you have to remember, as I am sure you realize, this is mainly a public relations thing anyway.[20] (Dean to the President on dealing with the Ervin Committee)

> On legal grounds, precedence, tradition, constitutional grounds and all that stuff you are just fine, but to the guy who is sitting at home who watches John Chancellor say the President is covering this up by this historic review blanket of the wildest exercise of executive privilege in American history and all that--he says 'what the hell's he covering up, why doesn't he let them go talk.'[21] (Haldeman to the President on executive privilege as grounds for Whitehouse staff members' refusal to testify before the Ervin Committee)

One would have to presume that Mr. Haldeman, in the preceding quotation, was relegating the ethical posture of the President to the realm of "all that stuff."

Haynes Johnson has crystalized the issue being explored here in the following observation:

> Richard Nixon, who had been in politics so long and who had supposedly profited from so many critical battles, had made a massive miscalculation . . . . By failing to act decisively, by attempting to conceal thwart, by putting loyalty to aides above loyalty to the people, by treating a moral issue in an amoral way, his fate was sealed.[22]

Substantially broadening the scope of responsibility for the attitude of officials in the Nixon Administration, the Mosher Commission expressed concern that "very few of the top witnesses" appearing before the Ervin Committee "indicated any sense of understanding or appreciation of democratic ideals or principles."[23]

Although the atmosphere of amorality that permeated the Nixon staff was undoubtedly an important contributing factor to the choice of strategies that eventually proved to be its undoing, one would be hard pressed to demonstrate that a purely pragmatic approach to the handling of Watergate necessarily would result in the wrong set of decisions. In other words,

it is conceivable that a group of completely amoral individuals could have arrived at the right decisions, and, depending on the particular moral standards to which its members subscribe, a group invested with the impulse to do what is right could make the wrong decisions. John Mitchell, for example, was at least willing to articulate a moral position for possibly his most disastrous personal decision when responding to one of Senator Talmadge's questions about putting the re-election of the President above his public responsibility: "Senator, I think you have put it exactly correct. In my mind the re-election of Richard Nixon, compared with what was available on the other side, was so much more important that I put it in just that context."[24]

The point I am trying to make is that the President and his collaborators, without any reference to what is ethically defensible or indefensible, could have arrived at a decision not to participate in the cover-up, or to allow it to continue once it was under weigh, from an exclusively pragmatic assesement of the legal consequences likely to accrue from such activity and of the difficulties involved in successfully pursuing that course of action. To have so decided, when evaluated against even their own criterion of effectiveness, would have resulted in minimal loss. Instead, they executed a suicidal plan of containment.

Inhibiting the ability of these individuals to function adequately was the fact that they enacted a solution prematurely without fully understanding the magnitude or the ramifications of the problem it was designed to correct; consequently, the act of decision apparently created a sense of commitment from which they would not retreat. Even a casual

examination of the Presidential transcripts reveals a focus on how to make the cover-up work rather than on the wisdom of the initial decision. Potentially contributing to this preoccupation were a number of exogenous factors, including the seeming success of the cover-up during its first stages, the President's landslide re-election, the United States' disengagement from Viet Nam, the general absence of investigation by major news media (the Washington Post being a notable exception), and the lack of public outcry. The quietude was deceptive, however. The distinction between quiescence and acquiescence was one the President and his political entourage were incapable of drawing.

In addition to the external events that may have suggested the desirability of continuing the cover-up, there were several characteristics of the principals and their method of handling issues that, from a group dynamics perspective, increased the probability that they would fail to discover the most sensible and judicious means of coping with the Watergate affair. Among these characteristics were similarities in their psychological make-up, an inability to conjecture adequately about matters germane to their decisions, excessive conformity to one another's normative expectations, a manifest propensity for digression, and an ignorance of facts vital to the case. The interaction among these factors and, no doubt, others that remain as yet unidentified virtually assured that the choice of the President and the members of his inner circle made would be the wrong choice.

Although homogeneity is a common source of interpersonal attraction and even a factor contributing to consensus, groups whose members have heterogeneous psychological profiles, in general, show greater capacity

for solving complex problems.[25] Shaw has suggested that the reason for such demonstrated superiority is that "a group that is heterogeneous on a number of member characteristics is more likely to have the needed attributes and is therefore more likely to be effective than a homogeneous group."[26] The danger in homogeneity, in part, is the absence of provocativeness.

Rather and Gates have pointed out that the individuals with whom the President most closely associated created precisely such a climate: "with a Haldeman--or an Ehrlichman too, for that matter--he was never in danger of being overstimulated. With them, Nixon always felt in control, and in command."[27] More important, however, was the fact that similarity was almost a mandate. Following the 1972 election, according to the Mosher Commission, "the Administration moved to cleanse itself of senior officials in many executive agencies who were considered to be hesitant or doubtful followers of the views and ideology of the President."[28]

Much has been written of the similarities among many of the people brought into the Nixon Administration. Characterizations, such as "All the king's Krauts" and "the Berlin Wall" have even been used to suggest their ideological solidarity. Moreover, geographic origin, education, social class, dress, religious background, hair length, vocabulary, and an interest in professional football have surfaced as indices of comparability. Possibly the most problematic of their similarities was the political amateurism of most of those who survived the Nixon purge.[29] The Presidential conversations themselves, however, probably constitute the best single source of information for identifying the degree of homogeneity in thought

exhibited by the four individuals on whom responsibility for continuing the Watergate cover-up rested. Time and space do not permit an exhaustive listing of relevant portions of the dialogue, but the following examples are representative:

On Political Enemies

President: I want the most comprehensive notes on those who tried to do us in. They didn't have to do it. If we had a very close election and they were playing the other side I would understand this. No—they were doing this quite deliberately and they were asking for it and they are going to get it. We have not used the power in the first four years as you know. We have never used it. We have not used the Bureau and we have not used the Justice Department but things are going to change now. And they are either going to do it right or go.

Dean: What an exciting prospect.[30]

On the Involvement of Members of the Whitehouse Staff

Dean: Well, I thought (inaudible) by keeping on top of it it would not harm you. Maybe the individuals would get harmed.

President: We don't want to harm these people either. That is my concern. They were doing things for the best interests of their country—that is all.

Haldeman: Well, we don't have a question of some guy stashing money in his pocket.

President: It isn't something like this, for example, (expletive deleted) treason.[31]

On the Public Conscience*

President: This thing is just one of those side issues and a month later everybody looks back and wonders what all the shooting was about.[32]

*The quotations in this section are not sequential as in the previous two sections.

Dean: The public is bored with this thing already.[33]

President: Well, one hell of a lot of people don't give one damn about this issue of suppression of the press, etc.[34]

When the members of a group possess such similarity in attitudes, especially on issues with which they are directly involved, their ability to perceive the weaknesses inherent in the decisions they reach is adversely affected. Their tendency is to reinforce one another's misperceptions. This would help explain some of the conjectural deficiencies displayed in the Presidential conversations as the discussants assessed the probabilities for success. Among the more serious miscalculations were the perceived allegiance of Senator Baker and the capability of Senator Gurney,[35] the impact of the Gray confirmation hearings,[36] the utility of a new grand jury proceeding to limit the investigation of the Ervin Committee,[37] the actions of Judge Sirica in dealing with the Watergate defendants,[38] and, of course, the public interest.[39]

In addition to the possible influence of interpersonal similarity on the Nixon group's apparent capacity for well reasoned conjecture, other factors may have played a critical role. Shure, Larsen, and Tassone have shown that groups, in general, tend not to use the opportunities they have to organize efficiently in solving problems.[40] In spite of the Administration's reputation for organization, indeed its "zero defect system," the conversations among Nixon, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Dean reveal an almost random approach to the identification of potential problems. Maier and Solem have further discovered that the pressure to reach a

solution can prevent groups from systematically identifying problem requirements and reviewing their method of dealing with them.[41] Since the President's inner circle began with a solution rather than an analysis of the problem they faced, it is hardly surprising that their ability to make appropriate estimates on critical conjectural issues proved so limited.

Still another major obstacle to intelligent decision-making in the Watergate case was the President and his advisors' conformity to one another's normative expectations. That is, none ever deviated in any significant way from his role requirements--at least, not during the period from September 15, 1972 to March 22, 1973, the stage in which most of the crucial decisions were made. Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Dean were each subordinate to the President and were deferential in their reactions to his judgments on virtually every occasion it appeared that his position might be questionable. John Dean, for example, in the March 21 conversations tried to warn the President of the complications beginning to develop in continuing the cover-up and expressed a lack of confidence in weathering the storm.[42] When it became apparent that this was not an acceptable belief, within minutes, a revitalized Dean was saying, "I can give them a show we can sell them just like we were selling Wheaties . . . ."[43] In yet another instance during a conversation held later the same day, Dean proposed a "clean house now" strategy for bringing the Watergate case to a close--at least, as it affected the Whitehouse. The President, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, however, had already apparently agreed that the best thing to do was to issue a new "Dean report," one that, like its non-existent predacessor,

would reveal nothing but, nonetheless, create an impression of cooperativeness.[44] Dean's initiative was rather quickly subdued.

Possibly the most explicit recognition of role requirements is reflected in the following exchange by the President and Dean:

> Dean: Yes, sir, I spent some years on the Hill myself and one of the things I always noticed was the inability of the Congress to deal effectively with the Executive Branch because they never provided themselves with adequate staffs, had adequate information available--
>
> President: Well now they have huge staffs compared to what we had.
>
> Dean: Well they have huge staffs, true, as opposed to what they had years ago. But they are still inadequate to deal effectively--
>
> President: (Expletive deleted) Don't try to help them out!
>
> Dean: I am not suggesting any reserve money for them. I ought to keep by observations to myself.[45]

The President, as superior, was presumably to be the final judge of any position the group might take. On March 22, he executed this function with great alacrity: "I don't give a shit what happens. I want you all to stonewall it, let them plead the Fifth Amendment, cover-up or anything else, if it'll save the plan."[46] Up to this point the group had been discussing alternatives to the cover-up strategy in which they had been locked for the preceding nine months, but now all other avenues of pursuit were effectively shut off. Listening to the directive were Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Dean, and Mitchell. No one challenged the statement or made any response that would indicate the position was unacceptable. The President had spoken with finality, and there was nothing left for the others to do but comply.

The statement also signaled the end of the group as it had existed. Circumstances and individuals subsequently conspired to alter the course the President had so clearly charted. By April 30, he would be calling for the resignations of his three closest associates and would have to begin anew his struggle to prevent the Watergate case from enveloping, and ultimately destroying, his administration.

Hoffman has written perceptively that "the major barriers to effective problem solving are those conditions which prevent the free expression of ideas in a group. Restraints can decrease the likelihood that the correct solution or the elements of such a solution will be made available to the group."[47] So it was that the restraints Richard Nixon and his advisors imposed on themselves through their lack of independence prevented them from making the only realistic choice they had available.

Although homogeneity, inadequate examination of the implications of the problem, and conformity tendencies are probably sufficient to account for the failures of those deciding to continue the Watergate cover-up, another factor worth mentioning was the group's propensity for digression. Chief among the guilty parties was the President himself. The others involved tended merely to follow his lead.

When discussing the Federal Bureau of Investigation's inquiry into the Watergate break-in, the President, agreeing with Haldeman's characterization of the whole matter as silly, noted that Senator Goldwater had put the problem into perspective in his observation that "everybody bugs everybody else."[48] It would have appeared more efficacious under the circumstances to be concentrating on what the investigation might reveal. In another instance, the President and Dean were discussing the appropriate response

to the Ervin Committee regarding the testimony of members of the Whitehouse Staff. The discussion stimulated the President to suggest that Dean instruct Attorney General Kleindienst to "go back and read the first chapter of SIX CRISES."[49] This preparation, of course, would equip the Attorney General for knowing exactly how to deal with the situation.

Dean, apparently accustomed to digressions of this sort, on occasion manifested similar tendencies. Later in the same conversation, he was compelled to observe that "the fine hand of the Kennedys is behind this whole hearing."[50] The point was quite irrelevant in facing up to the question of what the Ervin Committee might be able to accomplish.

Of all the transcripts, the one detailing the June 23 conversations between the President and Haldeman reveals most clearly the tendency toward digression. Having just agreed to have the CIA interfere with the FBI investigation of the Watergate break-in, this twosome diverted their attention to an incredible assortment of topics, including politics, the devaluation of the lira, the Miami Convention, Pat and the girls' hairdo problems when descending from a helicopter, and, of course Six Crises.[51] Assuming the role of literary critic, the President passed one of his frequent judgments on the book's merits: "Six Crises is a damned good book, and the (unintelligible) story reads like a novel—the Hiss case--Caracas was fascinating. The campaign of course for anybody in politics should be a must . . . ."[52]

Digression per se is not harmful. The difficulty posed by digressions such as those previously mentioned, however, is that they tended to result in issues discussed being left unresolved or in the abandonment of

examination of the wisdom of positions taken. As a consequence of digression, the members of the group would turn to another point. The continuous shifting of attention virtually precluded coming to a full understanding of the dimensions of any single issue raised. And even though the right issues were occasionally raised, they were not resolved.

In addition to the examples drawn from the June 23 transcript, an excellent illustration of the pattern can be found in the September 15 conversation. Dean, having indicated some dissension between the Committee to Re-elect the President and the Finance Committee to Re-elect the President, stimulated the President's outburst and subsequent request for information on political enemies. After this digression, the discussion turned to the GAO audit, and the original point was never brought up again.[53] The mere possibility of such dissension should have been a source of concern, but the President, Dean, and Haldeman appeared oblivious to its implications.

There is abundant evidence to suggest that groups whose members are problem oriented rather than solution oriented make better decisions.[54] The propensity for digression, then, coupled with the Nixon people's prematurely enacted solution to the Watergate Crisis could only have increased the probability of their continuing an unwise policy and of not fully analyzing the difficulties it might create.

The final factor likely to have had impact on the quality of decision-making by Nixon *et al.* was their ignorance of matters relevant to the case. Although it is difficult to accept Bebe Rebozo's assertion to Mike Wallace in a CBS interview that the President read only the sports page of the newspapers to which he subscribed, it is not at all difficult to

accept the proposition that he was ignorant of many aspects of the Watergate case.

One of the more consistent, and perhaps obvious, findings in small group research is that there is a direct relationship between problem-solving effectiveness and the level of information that the members of a group possess.[55] In the case of the Presidential problem-solvers, the level of knowledge and information was deficient in any number of respects. They did not seem to understand the extent of the involvement of people associated with the Watergate break-in and related criminal activities. For example, in commenting on Segretti and Chapin and what the Ervin Committee might uncover, Dean observed that "we can keep the Segretti stuff in perspective because it's not that bad. Chapin's involvement is not that deep."[56] Both were subsequently indicted, convicted, and sentenced to prison. As late as March 13, the President was still ignorant of the roles Mitchell, Haldeman, and Dean had played in the development of the intelligence plan commissioned by the Committee to Re-elect the President and which lead to the break-in of the DNC headquarters.[57]

The group underestimated how those on the periphery would handle the pressure of an investigation and, hence, inaccurately perceived the scope of the difficulty their strategy embraced. Kalmbach was "hunkered down and ready to handle it,"[58] Strachan was "as tough as nails,"[59] Mitchell would put on "that big stone face,"[60] Stans was not "in any serious problem ultimately," and even though "it /the Senate hearings/ could be rough and tumble," Maury was "ready to take it,"[61] Magruder would "be a good witness,"[62] and Dean himself could safely predict that "there will never be a leak out of my office. I wouldn't begin to know how to leak and I

don't want to learn how to leak."[63]

Another index of ignorance was the apparent lack of understanding of the circumstances under which a judge's reactions to testimony constitutes grounds for a mistrial as the following response to Judge Sirica's courtroom behavior indicates: "Commenting on witnesses' testimony before the Jury, was just incredible. Incredible. So there may be a mistrial. Or maybe reversible error." [64] Consistent with their lack of knowledge in the area of criminal justice was an apparent misconception of executive privilege. At least, Dean and the President seemed to feel that the principle was flexible enough to include having administration officials withhold information relevant to a criminal proceeding.[65] Haldeman on other occasions manifested a similar belief.

Possibly the most fatal bit of ignorance lay in the group's understanding of the nature of obstruction of justice. Of the four principals involved in the cover-up, only Dean seemed to grasp the significance of this concept. His March 21 conversation with the President, if not astounding, is at least revealing:

> President: Talking about your obstruction of justice though, I don't see it.
>
> Dean: Well, I have been a conduit for information on taking care of people out there who are guilty of crimes.
>
> President: Oh, you mean like the blackmailers?
>
> Dean: The balckmailers, Right.
>
> President: Well, I wonder if that part of it can't be--I wonder if that doesn't--let me put it frankly. I wonder if that doesn't have to be continued? Let me put it this way: let us suppose you could get the million bucks, and you could get the proper way

to handle it. You could hold that side?

Dean: Uh huh.

President: It would seem to me that would be worthwhile.[66]

It is almost inconveivable that one who understood obstruction of justice under these circumstances would propose a further obstruction as the remedial course of action.

The beginning of the end was now in sight. The President had passed up the last real opportunity to call the cover-up to a halt and to escape with minimal consequences. Subsequent discussions were restricted to an assortment of schemes, strategies, and worthless plots and were accompanied by a growing deterioration in interpersonal relations as Dean, Ehrlichman, and Haldeman each, in turn, began to recognize that he was expendable. Of the three, Dean was probably the most realistic. He cooperated in bringing the facts of Watergate to light. Ehrlichman, although bitter about his undoing, chose not to be cooperative and is now suffering the consequences of that decision. And Haldeman, to this day, still professes to have done nothing wrong. Whatever his posture, none of these individuals is likely to escape the censure of history for his role in the Watergate cover-up, but surely the severest judgment will be reserved for the man who led them through perhaps our nation's greatest political disgrace.

Implications

Throughout this essay, I have been trying to show how particular characteristics contributed to what, in retrospect, must appear to be an

extremely unwise, if not disastrous, set of policy decisions initiated and perpetuated by a small group of public officials. None of what they did, of course, is necessarily the consequence of any single factor. The combination of variables operating within the group, however, does provide a perspective for comprehending the otherwise seemingly inexplicable series of events that occurred in the final two years of Richard Nixon's political career.

A number of other explanations have been offered. Theodore White,[67] for example, develops the thesis that Nixon somehow lost sight of the myth that enshrouds the Presidency and thereby underestimated the public response to his behavior. Rather and Gates,[68] on the other hand, seem to attribute the causes for Watergate most fundamentally to the isolation of the President by his key associates. Proceeding from the perspective of historical evolution, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.[69] argues that, in large measure, Watergate resulted from an expanded view of the scope of Executive responsibility and power. Eli Chesin[70] pursues a psychoanalytic interpretation by relating the President's adult behavior to his early childhood experiences. Starting with a somewhat more advanced age, Mankiewicz pursues the consistency angle as well. His point: the behavior of the Watergate conspirators was vintage Nixon politics. The only difference is that this time he was caught.[71] Finally, in the only analysis of group characteristics I have found, Bertram Raven[72] had adapted Janis' group-think hypothesis to the Watergate case. He argues that the President's personality, the type of associates with whom he surrounded himself, and the group's sociometric structure interacted to reduce restraint against extreme and immoral actions.

Each of these points of view undoubtedly has some validity in understanding the development of the climate in which Nixon and his advisors functioned, but the fact still remains that the President could have made the right decision. To understand why he did not, one has to focus on the communication behavior of the group involved as that behavior reflects the forces that inhibited their ability to make not only what would have been "the easy" decision but the right one as well.

Upon assuming the Presidency, Gerald Ford declared that "our long nightmare is over." But is it? Or has it merely been repressed to the collective sub-conscious? One of Raven's conclusions in his study of the Nixon Administration was that the processes observed "differ only in extremity from those which might well develop in any governing body."[73] Given similar circumstances, the same kind of problem can arise again. The implications of such a possibility are clear. We need public officials who understand both the substantive and ethical requirements of effective decision-making, and not until we begin to demand a demonstration of such competencies can we be confident that the specter of Watergate is safely in our past.

FOOTNOTES

1. Richard M. Nixon. Cited in Time Magazine, August 19, 1974, p. 15.

2. John W. Dean. Cited in the Senate Watergate Report, vol. I (New York: Dell, 1974), 59.

3. Included in the break-in were James McCord, Bernard Barker, Frank Sturgis, Virgilio Gonzales, and Eugenio Martinez. See The End of A Presidency (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), p. 128.

4. The Final Report of the Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 61.

5. The End of a Presidency, p. 130.

6. Jeb Stuart Magruder, An American Life: One Man's Road to Watergate (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 270.

7. See the June 23, 1972 Presidential conversations. In The End of a Presidency, pp. 327-353.

8. Magruder, p. 260.

9. Ibid., pp. 252-300.

10. The End of a Presidency, pp. 327-353.

11. The Presidential Transcripts (New York: Dell, 1974), pp. 32-43. Although there were numerous discrepancies between the Whitehouse version of the transcripts and the House Judiciary Committee's version, for the passages and quotations referred to in this essay, there were no material differences.

12. Ibid., pp. 687-688.

13. Ibid., pp. 687-688.

14. The Final Report of the Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives, p. 105.

15. The Presidential Transcripts, p. 118.

16. Ibid., p. 13.

17. Ibid., p. 40.

18. Ibid., p. 42.

19. Ibid., p. 63.

20. Ibid., p. 57.

21. Ibid., p. 165.

22. Haynes Johnson, "Richard Milhous Nixon, The 37th President, Whose Trust Was in Himself," The Fall of a President (New York: Dell, 1974), p. 21.

23. Frederick C. Mosher, Watergate: Implications for Responsible Government (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 13.

24. The Watergate Hearings: Break-in and Cover-up (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 390.

25. L. Richard Hoffman, "Homogeneity of Member Personality and Its Effect on Group Problem Solving," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 58(1959), 27-32.

26. Marvin E. Shaw, Group Dynamics: The Psychology of Small Group Behavior (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. 224.

27. Dan Rather and Gary Gates, The Palace Guard (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 252.

28. Mosher, p. 9.

29. For a discussion of the political naiveté of Nixon's associates, see Theodore H. White, The Making of the President 1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), pp. 360-400.

30. The Presidential Transcripts, p. 38.

31. Ibid., pp. 143-144.

32. Ibid., p. 36.

33. Ibid., p. 47.

34. Ibid., p. 48.

35. Ibid., pp. 49-50, 62.

36. Ibid., p. 71.

37. Ibid., p. 135.

38. Ibid., p. 82.

39. Ibid., p. 83.

40. G. H. Shure, M. S. Rogers, Ida M. Larsen, and J. Tassone, Group Planning and Task Effectiveness," Sociometry, 25 (1962), 263-282.

41. N. R. F. Maier and A. R. Solem, "Improving Solutions by Turning Choice Situations into Problems," Personnel Psychology, 15(1962), 151-157.

42. The Presidential Transcripts, p. 115.

43. Ibid., p. 120.

44. Ibid., pp. 141-151.

45. Ibid., p. 53.

46. The Final Report of the Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives, p. 188.

47. L. Richard Hoffman, "Group Problem Solving," Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), II (New York: Academic Press, 1965), p. 100.

48. The Presidential Transcripts, p. 34.

49. Ibid., p. 45.

50. Ibid., p. 54.

51. The End of a Presidency, pp. 327-347.

52. Ibid., p. 345.

53. The Presidential Transcripts, pp. 37-38.

54. For a review of this research, see Hoffman, pp. 118-120.

55. See, for example, Marvin E. Shaw, "Some Factors Influencing the use of Information in Small Groups," Psychological Reports, 8(1961), pp. 187-198 and Shaw's review of other research bearing on this issue in Group Dynamics: The Psychology of Small Group Behavior, pp. 166-169.

56. The Presidential Transcripts, p. 60.

57. Ibid., p. 86.

58. Ibid., p. 61.

59. Ibid., p. 85.

60. Ibid., p. 64.

61. Ibid., p. 45.

62. Ibid., p. 81.

63. Ibid., pp. 58-59.

64. Ibid., p. 82.

65. Ibid., pp. 96-97.

66. Ibid., p. 117.

67. Theodore H. White, Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon (New York: Atheneum, 1975).

68. Rather and Gates, The Palace Guard.

69. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Imperial Presidency (New York: Popular Library, 1973).

70. Eli S. Chesen, President Nixon's Psychiatric Profile (New York · Berkley, 1973).

71. Frank Mankiewicz, U.S. v. Richard M. Nixon: The Final Crisis (New York: Quadrangle, 1975).

72. Bertram Raven, "The Nixon Group," Unpublished manuscript presented to the American Psychological Association, August 31, 1974.

73. Ibid., p. 29.